

Back to basics

The Army must reinforce standards of discipline

BY CHARLES D. ALLEN

Nearly two years into the Army Profession campaign, this systematic effort to identify and promote key principles has assessed the service's strengths and weaknesses, identified things it needs to embrace — and made clear that discipline in the ranks has become a casualty of war. Now, as service leaders prepare to set the standards for the Army of 2020, they can default to the prewar “tried and true” or they can seize the opportunity to embed and apply innumerable lessons from a decade of conflict.

FINDING THE PROBLEMS

In its search for key attributes, the campaign — launched as “Profession of Arms” and championed by Gen. Martin Dempsey, then the commander of Training and Doctrine Command — conducted numerous discussions with senior leaders. Discipline quickly emerged both as a central tenet and a current problem area.

Participants in the discussions noted that troops and units were in the news for behavior inconsistent with Army values (see Jim Frederick's “Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death” and statistics from the Department of Defense Annual Reports of Sexual Assault). Subsequent conversations centered on charges of questionable performance and leadership in the field. (For example, see The Washington Post reporter Greg Jaffe's “Army edits its history of the deadly battle of Wanat.”) Senior leaders seemed to agree with the common assertion that standards of discipline were being enforced inconsistently across the operational and institutional force.

This echoed perceptions captured in the 2011 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership. The survey found that 74 percent of leaders did not agree that the Army was headed in the right direction. “A lack of discipline, or the ‘Army is too soft’ ” was the most frequent reason given by noncommissioned officers and the second-most common given by warrant and company-grade officers. Surveys of the

force noted similar perceptions and concerns.

In its April 2012 annual report about the Army Profession campaign, TRADOC listed five areas of concerns under “Improving Standards and Discipline”:

- Perceived difference in standards between home station and operational environments.
- Perceived relaxation of standards during the reset and train/ready phases of Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN).
- Loss of fundamental skills in personal and organizational leadership.
- Concern with the relevance and rigor of institutional training.
- Barely half of those surveyed stated that their units and direct leaders have high standards of discipline.

There are many possible reasons for the perceived decline in standards. Many flowed from the steps the Army took to fill demand for combat and supporting units in Iraq and Afghanistan. As acknowledged in the 2011 Army Posture Statement, the service lowered its accession standards in the previous decade, leading to a 65 percent increase in “moral” waivers for recruits with criminal records from 2003 to 2006, among other effects.

The service also took pains to persuade or prevent soldiers from leaving. For enlisted service members, the primary means were “stop-loss” programs and enlistment and retention bonuses; for commissioned officers, the Army offered critical skills

retention bonuses to junior officers and established exceptionally high promotion rates to field-grade ranks. As Dempsey, by then the chief of staff, told Army Times last year, “We’re promoting 95 to 98 percent of captains to major, 93 or 95 percent of majors to lieutenant colonel. We shouldn’t be satisfied ... because 98 percent of captains don’t deserve to be promoted to major. Statistically, that’s an infeasible percentage.”

To keep leaders in the field, the Army compressed the duration of some of its professional military education schools. For example, the Warrior Leader Course, which prepares junior noncommissioned officers to lead team- and squad-size units, was reduced from one month to 17 days. As well, officers routinely deferred intermediate-level education and senior-level college courses designed to prepare them for sought-after

The institution must be disciplined in applying lessons from the past decade if it expects to develop a disciplined force for the future.

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assignments. Subsequently, sergeants were hurried back to units with less leadership training than their predecessors. With deferrals, field-grade officers, the “iron majors” of battalion and higher staffs, did not have the benefit of learning training management, administration and logistics and defense processes. And successful battalion commanders received on-the-job training for strategic leadership and enterprise-level management skills in lieu of timely attendance at school. Hence, those responsible for setting and enforcing standards within Army organizations may not have been afforded the full opportunity for leader development through professional military education.

In these and other areas, prewar standards for selection, assignment, retention and promotion of soldiers proved impractical, irrelevant or unenforceable in the face of the immediate needs of operational commanders. Put more simply, and as noted in the Army Profession findings, unit readiness for multiple deployments trumped established institutional standards. Imagine the cynicism of “no unit left behind” for operational deployments. Yet even as training and education opportunities dwindled and below-par individuals entered or stayed in the Army, the pressures of persistent conflict mounted. In their 2006 Sociological Focus article “Apples, Barrels, and Abu Ghraib,” George Mastroianni and George Reed detailed the corrosive effects of combat stresses on soldiers, ambiguity in military operations and multiple deployments. Among the consequences was a series of attention-grabbing headlines that started with Abu Ghraib and continues in contemporary media reports of unacceptable behavior on the battlefield, in garrison barracks and within contracting offices.

FIXING THE PROBLEMS

All this suggests that “human capital” management — with its core component, leader development — needs to be fixed. In a recent Army survey, 65 percent of active-duty general officers rated personnel management as one of the service’s worst-performing functions.

The Army’s Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel and Facilities framework remains sturdy; what is needed are changes to the personnel, leadership and education, and training aspects. In particular, the Army should reaffirm selection criteria for enlisted and officer accessions, employ validated instruments for personality and behavior assessments, and revitalize its development for the members of the Profession of Arms. The institution must be



disciplined to apply the lessons learned over the past decade if it expects to develop a disciplined force for the future. This will require discovering and establishing new standards.

■ **Personnel.** The Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery, administered to all service recruits since 1976, was revised in 2002 and renamed the Armed Forces Qualification Test. It assesses aptitude for military occupational specialties and potential achievement. It may be time to incorporate personality assessment as well. These are not tests that one has to pass, but empirically derived measures accepted by scholars.

Assessing emotional stability (one of the “Big Five” factors of personality along with conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness and extraversion) should help identify individuals who may be least resilient to the stresses of military life and at most risk. Moreover, a general policy of assessing individuals when they enter the service would provide baseline data that, paired with information about later performance, much like the recent National Football League effort to establish baselines for traumatic brain injuries, could help researchers analyze trends and assist senior military leaders in making informed policy decisions.

When it comes to ill discipline by soldiers, Mark Twain’s quip, “the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior,” suggests that the Army should have data of past conduct in



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Army recruits learn patrolling tactics during basic training at Fort Jackson, S.C.

their civilian life. Such information may also help leaders understand an interesting phenomenon. In 2007, the Army G-1 reported that soldiers who enlisted with moral waivers were more likely to have disciplinary action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and to be discharged. But they also found that such soldiers were also promoted faster in the infantry branch to noncommissioned officer (sergeant), more likely to re-enlist and received more commendations for valor than non-waivered enlistees.

The Army Research Institute is looking at ways to assess personality and determine behavioral indicators that predict initial success.

■ **Leadership and education.** Arguably, the most important element of the DOTMLPF framework is the development of leaders. Unlike the corporate or political world, the nation cannot simply hire mid- or senior-level officers for lateral entry into the profession. They must be developed from the beginning of their service, and this development will be more effective if the military accesses officers with the right attributes from the start. One good step, therefore, would be establishing selection criteria as clear and rigorous for Officer Candidate School and Reserve Officer Training Corps programs as for the service academies.

Given the desire to manage talent within the ranks of the officer corps, it is reasonable that the Army seek to acquire

the very best from the onset. Hence, the push to get ROTC programs back onto Ivy League college campuses. The institution must be disciplined in the selection of its junior officers who during their service will be responsible for achieving and maintaining standards. They are the ones who instill discipline through their leadership in periods of peace and inevitable conflict. The Army must be equally disciplined to ensure that its officer-leaders attend required professional military education — on time — which provides the requisite knowledge and competencies for success during their careers.

■ **Training.** Army units must also revitalize their professional development programs, which were pronounced lacking by most surveyed during the Army Profession campaign. Senior leaders should be concerned when less than one-third of those surveyed agreed their organizations have effective professional development programs, and just under one-half stated they are actively taught what it means to be an Army professional.

It is not enough to teach the concepts of leadership and character development in the TRADOC schoolhouses (now Centers of Excellence), nor to have those topics on the checklist of annual or quarterly training requirements. Officers and NCOs, particularly commanders and command sergeants major, are responsible for the professional development of those members within their ranks. But it appears that over the course of the past decade at war, leaders believe their units are too busy to conduct professional development sessions within their organizations. This is one of the old practices that must be rejuvenated within the operational and institutional Army. Leaders discussing Army values and professional ethics have the opportunity to provide context for otherwise abstract concepts. Conversations about standards of conduct and how they relate to daily experiences will generate both visibility and the expectation of accountability for personal actions.

Today, the Army has the chance to redress both the perceptions and the facts of ill discipline in ranks. To properly care for the Army's most valuable assets — its people — it is important to clearly describe the behaviors that we expect of our soldiers and their leaders, and to hold the institution accountable for maintaining high standards. Perhaps the most important and enabling attribute for the Army profession is the discipline to do what we know is right. **AFJ**